Consuming Women: Patriarchy, Objectification, and the Politics of Meat Refusal in the Vegetarian

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ABSTRACT:
This article presents a critical ecofeminist and posthumanist interpretation of Han Kang's The Vegetarian, examining how the novel reveals the existence of patriarchal structures in conjunction with other vices, including consumption, objectification, and the rejection of one's body. The paper analyses certain narrative lines such as marital oppression, family pressure, sexual objectification, and violence in institutions to illustrate how Yeong-hye's abstention from meat is a radical act of moral and political resistance in a society where gender is a crucial factor. The transformation from human to the vegetal is explained by the author as the character's way of dealing with the accumulated trauma and trying to regain control over her body in a way that transcends patriarchal power. The research shows that the power of patriarchy works both in personal relationships and at the level of institutions, making use of the metaphors related to consumption. Meat refusal is a novel way of subversion which unsettles patriarchal values, but at the same time makes the dissenter an object of harsh social criticism. The study concludes that Yeong-hye's arboreal transformation represents a transgressive identity that is no longer human, where freedom, opposition, and self-denial intersect in intricate and ambiguous ways. This research contributes to global feminist literary scholarship as it highlights the issues of gendered violence, food politics, trauma, and ecofeminist ethics, which are well connected with the novel's political, ethical, and aesthetic resonances

Keywords: The Vegetarian; patriarchy; ecofeminism; posthumanism; meat refusal; gendered violence; bodily autonomy; objectification theory

Introduction

Background of Study

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) tells the story of Yeong-hye, a woman whose sudden and total denial of meat makes her the black sheep of a deeply patriarchal Korean family. In her escalating desire to transform into a plant, Yeong-hye's abstinence from meat leads to the total repudiation of food altogether, and she is abandoned by her family and admitted into a psychiatric facility. The fragmented narrative of the novel, reflected through different points of view, makes the female body the site of contention where issues of power, violence, and societal rules are worked out (Lai; Cluett).

Contemporary criticism has varied in its readings of the work, interpreting it as a study of trauma, mental illness, or posthuman becoming; yet, recurring analytical threads stress how food, desire, and the gaze together reproduce gendered subordination (Srivastava; Tsimpouki). The politics of meat— a topic that has been deeply explored in ecofeminist literature—offers an insightful approach for this research: Carol J. Adams and other scholars have claimed that eating meat largely indicates power over women and the symbolic consumption of women (Adams 548–57), which is an argument that has been recently strengthened in the readings of Han Kang by the authors who deal with the issue of Carno-phallogocentric power dynamics (Sen; Ghimire).

Statement of Research Problem

Even though the critics have pointed to trauma, madness, and plant subjectivity as the main themes of *The Vegetarian*, there is still a need for a study that will incorporate all these aspects and place Yeong-hye's dietary refusal precisely at the intersection of patriarchy, objectification, and meat politics. The existing literature is often dichotomous regarding vegetarianism: either it is considered as an aspect of the character's illness or as a metaphor for the character's spiritual growth. The present paper argues that the character's rejection of meat is a politically expressive act that has its meanings challenged and regulated by the institutions of patriarchy—husbandly entitlement, familial coercion, artistic appropriation, and medical authority. This leads to the formulation of the research problem: In what ways do patriarchal structures and objectification practices shape Yeong-hye's refusal of meat, and what does this reveal about the politics of consumption and the struggle for bodily autonomy?

Purpose of the Study

This research intends to carry out an analysis of *The Vegetarian* based on feminist and ecofeminist theoretical prisms: (1) to show the way in which patriarchal power and objectification drive the responses to the refusal of the body, (2) to explain the refusal of the meat as a means of performing the ethical and political resistance, and (3) to scrutinise the uncertain condition of Yeong-hye's vegetation transformation as a new form of both liberation and death. The work aims to close a gap in integrated readings of the novel by merging meat politics (Adams; Malatino; Yilmaz) with scholarship on gender-based violence and objectification (McKenna; Pugliese).

Research Objectives

1. To examine manifestations of patriarchal power in *The Vegetarian* and how they regulate female bodily autonomy.

2. To analyse the various modalities of objectification (sexual, visual, institutional) enacted upon Yeong-hye.

3. To interpret meat refusal as an ethical and political form of resistance within the novel's socio-cultural frame.

4. To explore the symbolic and theoretical implications of Yeong-hye's bodily transformation—particularly the tension between self-liberation and self-erasure.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does patriarchy manifest across family, artistic, and institutional responses to Yeong-hye's vegetarianism? (Shakeel et al.; Munir and Liaqat)

2. How is Yeong-hye objectified by male characters and institutional discourses, and how does this objectification attempt to re-appropriate her refusal? (Panta and Adhikari; Pugliese)

3. To what extent does vegetarianism function as a political act of refusal rather than merely symptomatic behaviour? (Adams; Sen; Sanan)

4. How does the motif of plant-becoming complicate definitions of agency, autonomy, and resistance within patriarchal cultural structures? (Tsimpouki; Ghimire; Lai)

Significance of the Study

This research enhances the field of feminist literary criticism and ecofeminism by presenting a unified reading of gendered consumption and

the refusal of the body in a significant contemporary novel. The study explores a very explicit gap in literature—the few scholars who have applied the tripod of patriarchy, objectification theory, and the politics of meat to *The Vegetarian* have been criticised for not being recent (see Moreno Redondo, Snigdha, and Gomathi). The paper's interdisciplinary approach—merging meat politics, body studies, trauma theory, and post-humanity—brings fresh insights to everyone from Korean literature scholars to those in feminist theory and animal-human studies, and it also has impacts on the larger discussions of food, gender, and embodied resistance.

Theoretical Framework

The interpretation of *The Vegetarian* is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation that consists of feminist theory, ecofeminism, objectification theory, posthumanism, and trauma/madness studies, among others. This combination of theories reveals the intersections of patriarchal domination, consumption, embodiment, and resistance as the novel's narrative unfolds. The theory is hereby made openly integrative since it represents the novel's multifaceted struggle for the acceptance of gender, violence, ecology, and bodily rights.

Feminist Theory and Patriarchal Power

Feminist theory is the primary perspective through which the transformation of Yeong-hye's body into a subject of patriarchal governance and control is comprehended. Feminist theorists, in the footsteps of Simone de Beauvoir, have claimed that male-dominated societies distribute power by legitimising male dominance and depriving women of their rights over their own bodies. The same still very much applies in *The Vegetarian*, as Yeong-hye's husband keeps claiming his right to her physical presence, her time, and her work. His claims mirror the conventional perception of marriage in which women are regarded as useful only to the extent that they satisfy domestic and sexual expectations (Shakeel et al. 119-33).

McKenna states that patriarchal societies operate by making implicit "contracts" which require women to be submissive in return for social acceptance (McKenna 47–64). Yeong-hye's choice of a vegetarian diet breaks these silent contracts, leading to what Munir and Liaqat perceive as a Foucault-like disciplining of the female deviant protagonist, thus unveiling that women's defiance is marked as an ailment that needs to be treated either medically or socially (97–110). The family's brutal effort to make her eat meat and her being hospitalised for not eating are cases that demonstrate how the power of patriarchy keeps an eye on and punishes non-conformity in people's bodies.

Ali claims that food choices carry gender implications very often, considering women's eating habits are identified with concepts of identity, purity, and submission in patriarchal societies (268–88). Therefore, Yeong-hye's refusal of meat does not become a matter of diet, but rather, it is the breaking of the patriarchy's feminine obedience that makes it intolerable. So, feminist theory explains that Yeong-hye's noiseless defiance dislocates the established male power structure, which tries to master her physical body by force and bring it back to the submissive state.

Ecofeminism and the Sexual Politics of Meat

Ecofeminism is the second most important aspect of this analysis. In Carol J. Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, the author argues that such linking between the oppression of women and the use of animals plays a big role in the establishment of patriarchal cultures and that meat is one such gendered symbol of men's power (p. 548-57). Adams elaborates by saying that both women and animals are treated as objects of consumption through the 'absent referent' process that she has defined, where the entity being consumed-whether an animal or a woman-vanishes behind the product or its representation (Malatino 128-34).

In *The Vegetarian*, this dynamic is noticeably clear, as Yeong-hye turns into both a literal and symbolic object of consumption. Sen particularly describes the novel as an ecofeminist criticism of "carnophallogocentrism" — a system where meat-eating, patriarchy, and logocentric authority

support one another (Sen). In the same way, Drewett and Yilmaz underline that vegetarian refusal confronts symbolically the masculinity associated with meat and thus reveals the cultural notions that deem women and animals' violence as a natural thing.

Ecofeminism interprets Yeong-hye's vegetarianism not as a pathology but as a political and ethical stance. Her refusal turns out to be a physical rejection of the patriarchal meat culture, which Harrison defines as part of hegemonic masculinity's performance and maintenance (33–43). Ferreira points out that the gendered politics of meat associate the consumption of flesh with social hierarchies that favour masculine appetites (225–49). Hence, Yeong-hye's resistance not only undoes anthropocentric but also androcentric orders, declining to join the systems that turn bodies, whether human or non-human, into commodities.

Objectification Theory and the Consumable Female Body

The transformation of Yeong-hye into an object in *The Vegetarian* is a phenomenon that can be deciphered with the help of feminist theories that have already been uncovered, as these theories unveil the manner in which patriarchal structures turn women into mere tools for male desire, labour, and control. Among different philosophers working on the subject, Martha C. Nussbaum comes up with seven distinct features of objectification—instrumentality, fungibility, violability, ownership, denial of autonomy, denial of subjectivity, and body reduction—which are able to directly trace the line for Yeong-hye's experience (Nussbaum 257). Moreover, her husband's portrayal of her as "ordinary," "manageable," and "unexceptional" is a clear case of the point Nussbaum makes regarding the use of women as mere tools, since Yeong-hye is appreciated only for her utility in the domestic realm.

Fredrickson and Roberts' objectification theory builds on this basic framework by depicting how patriarchal societies lead women to adopt the male gaze in their self-evaluation, such that they indulge in self-surveillance and experience shame and fragmentation of their psyche. Yeong-hye's deepening isolation from her body reflects this psychological conflict, and the act of refusing to eat meat becomes her only way of exercising her claim to bodily freedom. In the same way, Susan Bordo's study of the "disciplined female body" indicates that females in a patriarchal setting are kept under control through the male power's ideal of submission, tenderness, and body conformity (Bordo 15). Yeong-hye's determination not to consume meat is a statement against the very nature of disciplinary control, and she evokes countermeasures from her husband and family that are increasingly brutal to regain authority, like forced-feeding and taking her to doctors.

In addition to that, Pugliese's study of the themes of male toxicity and dehumanisation in Asian feminist literature evokes the treatment Yeong-hye suffers, and in this way, he connects her objectification to a larger scale of patriarchal violence that turns women into marketable goods (Pugliese 22). As Munir and Liaqat claim, Yeong-hye is transfigured into "a post-human subject whose body is continuously overwritten by the gaze and will of men," thereby strengthening the argument for the systemic character of her objectification (Munir and Liaqat 103). Interpreted through this lens, Yeong-hye's suffering is a clear representation of the whole array of concerns that feminists bring forward on the commodification, silencing, and dispossession of women's bodies.

Posthumanism and Vegetal Affect

The idea of vegetal affect, which can be regarded as the affective, ethical, and philosophical orientation advocating for plant life, has such power that it can be applied to interpret the metamorphosis of Yeong-hye in a posthuman manner. In the instance of Yeong-hye, Yi-Peng Lai calls her "arboreal subjectivity", which he sees as a reflection of the withdrawal from human horror and a desire for a non-anthropocentric existence that is not subject to domination and harm (Lai 836).

A similar reasoning can be found in Michael Marder's case, who regards plants as the

manifestation of "non-hierarchical vitality," which is interpreted as the absence of predation or aggression; thereby, the very act of turning into a plant is equivalent to an apostasy to radical non-violence (Marder 52). This whole discourse becomes even more relevant when one considers the fact that the life of Yeong-hye is ruled by male brutality, the consumption, and the imposition of things. Lai explains this transformation by the idea of "arboreal subjectivity," claiming that Yeong-hye is trying to "resist" the violence of human society by merging with the peaceful, nurturing ontology of plant life (831-42). Ghimire sees her rejection of flesh—whether it be animal or human—as a posthuman ethical stance that similarly abstains from the torturous and consumerist practices (28-33). Emily Jane Cluett's concept of vegetal affect as emotional disruption gives new perspectives on the topic. Cluett claims that plant-becoming changes the dynamics of patriarchal affective economies by not performing emotional labour, not being compliant, and not being available physically (Cluett 4). Thus, Yeong-hye's change is a sort of emotional resistance, turning down the limits of the emotional and physical that are set for her. Ghimire is of the same opinion when he says that Yeong-hye's change represents "an ethical refusal of flesh" and that she embodies a posthuman ethic based on non-violence and empathy across species (Ghimire 30). The novel grants Yeong-hye's transformation by highlighting vegetal affect. Yeong-hye's transformation is not viewed as a breakdown but a deliberate and deep critique of anthropocentrism, carnivorous masculinity, and human rule, thus being an ethical-critical intervention. Through this posthuman perspective, the ecofeminist interpretations are augmented as it is shown that plant-becoming is both escape and resistance.

The critics do not agree on the matter; some see the change as liberating, while others view it as a tragedy. Macsiniuc believes that Yeong-hye's starvation images the acceptance of the anorexic female body through patriarchal violence (103–18), while Sands presents the bodily change as a kind of empathy with plants that overcomes the usual ways of feeling and political resistance (324–34). This study takes up the interpretive dilemma, and it proposes that the plant-becoming is both the extreme rejection of patriarchy and the manifestation of trauma-induced withdrawal.

Trauma and Madness: The Body in Pain

Trauma and madness studies quite literally add a final, and especially important, critical layer to the whole discussion. According to trauma theory, the body's response to extreme violence is often one of silence, withdrawal, or even self-transformation - all these patterns are reflected in Yeong-hye's behaviour, like reluctance to speak, eat, and do as others ask. In a sense, through a very thorough examination of the novel, Srivastava can conclude that the main character's decline is not a personal mental illness but rather a portrayal of the harsh, controlling structures dictating what a perfect woman should be like (43). For Hossain, the psychoanalytic interpretation of Yeong-hye's journey revolves around her going through the conflicting experiences of repression, rebellion, and transcendence in a patriarchal world that categorically marginalises her (617-64). Both Beeston and Pugliese go even further by asserting that social institutions kill women's spirits who refuse to conform to the traditional roles; madness is a label that is used against them, and they are subjected to psychiatric intervention to make them compliant. Thus, in a way, Yeong-hye's madness is a manifestation of her, rather than a severance of her identity, and an alternative method of expressing suffering. The process of her bodily alteration can be interpreted as a kind of non-verbal communication, a last resort to flee from a reality that does not even acknowledge her as a person entitled to exist.

Literature Review

Critical Readings of *The Vegetarian*

The current academic discourse around Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* has focused primarily on themes such as trauma, insanity, and silence. Critics have commonly viewed Yeong-hye's cessation of communication, food intake, and social interaction as a physical manifestation of her resistance to the oppressive, male-centred

society. Several scholars support the view that her "madness" is the result of prolonged coercion and family oppression, and internalised oppression in Korean society (Jones 214; Kim 87). The studies further elaborate on the topic of silence from a philosophical standpoint, implying that Yeong-hye's non-verbal communication is not simply a consequence of being sick, but rather an active resistance to the society's male-centred approach (Park 102).

Intellectuals who have studied the cultural norms in Korea have laid particular stress on the Confucian order that expects complete obedience, the role of women, and the common good, which together are the reasons for the pressures exerted on Yeong-hye (Lee 59–60). Thus, her meat abstinence becomes an act of defiance that breaks down the gendered expectations and the associated food practices (Cho 144). The aspects of trauma, madness, and silence in the novel have been the subject matter of critical analysis by scholars. Among them, Macsiniuc depicts Yeong-hye's physical withdrawal as the "anorexic resistance," she asserts that the refusal to eat is but the tip of the iceberg representing the entire psychological collapse due to the oppressive and violent patriarchal social order that is the basis of the women's community (Macsiniuc 110). Srivastava, on the other hand, looks at Yeong-hye's silence and madness in a sociopolitical way, asserting that these are the women's responses to the oppressive structures that suppress their agency (Srivastava 45). Also, Lai's interpretation of Yeong-hye's "arboreal subjectivity" views silence and starvation as the very acts of moral dissent against the violence inflicted (Lai 831).

Korean culture also exercises an influence on the story. Panta and Adhikari discuss how the male-dominated culture, family, and the male gaze cause Yeong-hye's suffering in that specific society (Panta and Adhikari 35). Al-Doory and Najm argue that Han's story unveils the conventional gender roles assigned to Korean women through the ethical practice of vegetarianism (Al-Doory and Najm 412). The symbolism and the narrative fragmentation have also been the areas of scrutiny by scholars. Sands, for example, points to the vegetal metaphors that the novel employs to convey empathy across distinct species as one of the key features of the novel (Sands 326). Further, Tsimpouki interprets the metamorphosis from an Ovidian and posthuman angle (Tsimpouki 212). The mentioned authors, among others, have converged on the point that the destabilising technique of the form of the novel is analogous to the deteriorating mental condition and the ethical choice of transformation of Yeong-hye.

Moreover, the critics mention the novel's disjointed structure and constantly changing narrative voices as the main points of argument in support of their view that these stylistic techniques reflect Yeong-hye's mental disintegration (Shin 33). The objects and occurrences with symbolic meanings—blood, meat, plants, and dreams—have been viewed through psychoanalytic and cultural perspectives as bodily autonomy, violence, and the possibility of one's reaching God (Kwon 71), respectively.

Studies on Meat Politics and Carnophallogocentrism

Ecofeminist scholarship, more specifically the works of Carol J. Adams and Jacques Derrida, offers an invaluable theoretical basis that underpins the comprehension of meat politics as well as the violence of patriarchy. The "absent referent" in Adams' theory illustrates how patriarchal societies obliterate the individuality of women and animals, granting their consumption (Adams 40-41) the status of natural. Derrida's concept of carnophallogocentrism also associates meat-eating with male power, anthropocentrism, and a hierarchy of reason (Derrida 112).

The above-mentioned frameworks have been used in the case of *The Vegetarian* to demonstrate that Yeong-hye's refusal of meat not only breaks the established rules of masculine consumption but also reveals the gendered oppression that is part of food culture (Bouson 67). In addition, the scholars suggest that the transformation of Yeong-hye into a plant being undermines the concept of human superiority and disturbs the gendered politics of bodily consumption (Kim 129). There are ecofeminist readings, but their

scope is still limited with respect to the integration of species politics and critique of patriarchy (Sohn 98).

Carol J. Adams, argues that women and animals are interconnected through the same patriarchal consumption system (Adams 549). Malatino, who is one of the supporters of Adams' theory, calls it a breakthrough and identifies one of the structures as "carnophallogocentric," where the dominance of men is reinforced by meat-eating (Malatino 129). Ferreira, on the other hand, likewise, shows the interrelation of meat eating and the politics of global gender and power (Ferreira 226). Sen points out that ecofeminist meat politics have a clear application in *The Vegetarian*, where he asserts that Yeong-hye's rejection disturbs the patriarchal rationale that equates masculinity with eating meat (Sen 12). Harrison supports this line of reasoning by demonstrating how the consumption of meat plays a role in the establishment of hegemonic masculinity in diverse cultures (Harrison 37). These works, considered together, lead to the conclusion that refusal of meat is not only a matter of diet but also politically significant, and thus, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism becomes an issue of gendered consumption.

Feminist Approaches to Objectification and Violence

Feminist analyses point to the multiple forms of objectification that Yeong-hye goes through during the novel. The most profound case of objectification is her body being transformed into a visual, sexual, and symbolic object through the male gaze, especially that of her brother-in-law, who is the most active in this regard (Bouson 72; Lee 101). Such scholarship relies on authorised feminist theories of the gaze and objectification, demonstrating in fact that male desire has the upper hand over Yeong-hye's agency (Mulvey 18).

Various researchers discuss the issue of sexual, aesthetic, and medical objectification in the novel. Shakeel, Salim, and Diljan take the position that the protagonist's body is a battleground of patriarchal powers where sexual repression and domestic fights find their acceptance (Shakeel et al. 121). Yeong-hye is placed by Drewett as a character in an extensive line of women in literature who have been turned into commodities (Drewett 14). Moreno Redondo brings to light that control exercised over food and women's bodies goes hand in hand with gender violence (Moreno Redondo 28).

The brother-in-law's filming of Yeong-hye, which he made purely from an erotic point of view, is a good example of visual objectification. Beeston argues that such depictions of women make them into "naturalised bodies" which lack any control over their lives (Beeston 681). Getting through the door of the mental hospital also means losing one's identity, and Munir and Liaqat suggest that the medical profession reclaims its authority by imposing patriarchal power through the psychiatric discipline (Munir and Liaqat 104). The scholarship on domestic violence highlights the controlling power of Yeong-hye's family, and it depicts the use of physical force and martial power as ways to discipline non-conforming women (Ko 55). Moreover, the critics study the psychiatric and institutional authority as patriarchal control, and they claim that the medical institutions label Yeong-hye's independence as a disease and make her practice the usual behaviour for the body (Chung 163). All these interpretations underscore the structural and interpersonal violence inherent in Yeong-hye's milieu.

Identified Research Gaps

Despite the substantial number of studies done on *The Vegetarian*, the existing research is lacking in several especially important ways. To begin with, while a large number of studies view the novel in the light of trauma, madness, and psychological disintegration (see Cho; Kim 112-14; Shin 87), they in fact hardly ever link the psychotic episodes of Yeong-hye to the larger patriarchal settings that facilitate the latter's downfall. This usually leads to the protagonist being interpreted in psychological terms instead of being seen through the lens of gendered oppression. On the other hand, though, objectification is one of the major themes frequently discussed in the novel—especially the

brother-in-law's eroticizing of Yeong-hye's body—analysis has in most cases been restricted to visual or sexual aspects only (Chung 54; Park 203). Feminist objectification theory (Bartky, MacKinnon, Nussbaum) is rarely applied, which interprets objectification as a process with multiple dimensions that includes fragmentation, silencing, violability, and ownership. The absence of this theory leads to an extremely limited way of looking at the issue that misses the big picture of gendered dehumanisation being a systemic thing. The research conducted on the meat politics present in the novel is still divided among different perspectives: Some scholars hint at the ecofeminist issues (Hwang 66; Willis 41), whereas others investigate Korean cultural practices regarding food, shame, and duty to parents (Jo 77). Nevertheless, only very few studies have dealt with the carnophallogocentric theory in such an explicit manner, particularly that of Carol J. Adams and Jacques Derrida, who focus on the ways patriarchal societies consume both female and animal bodies (Adams, *The Sexual Politics* 43; Derrida, "Eating Well" 278). Consequently, the political implications of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism—that is, its relation to gendered violence, domination, and the ethics of consumption—are still not adequately theorised.

To begin with, the references in scholarship to Yeong-hye's transformation into a "plant" rarely consider her desire in the context of debates about vegetal affect, posthuman embodiment, or the failure of human-centred subjectivity (Marder 6–8; Neimanis 153). Most interpretations treat her change as either madness or total spiritual ascent, but very few consider it in the light of ecofeminist theories, which question both anthropocentrism and gendered existence at the same time. The transformation of Yeong-hye carries a huge theoretical gap, and it is not clear whether this transformation could lead to the rethinking of autonomy beyond humanist and patriarchal scenarios. On top of that, when talking about Korean cultural limitations (such as hierarchical family structures, gendered obedience, and collectivist norms (Kwon 11; Sorensen 94)—the discussion is still very limited in literature concerning Korean meat politics in terms of the specific aspects of gendered food preparation labour, the cultural valorisation of meat in post-war modernization and the association of meat consumption with male power. Hence, Yeong-hye's refusal of meat is not correctly interpreted as a culture-bound act of resistance.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative research design is at the core of the study, which is supported by interpretative and textual analysis methods. *The Vegetarian*, with its literary and cultural dimensions, requires a sophisticated understanding of such elements as narrative voice, symbolic structure, and socio-political contexts; hence, qualitative inquiry is of assistance in the unveiling of thematic complexities, representation of gendered violence, and the politics of consumption in the novel. The method stands on an interpretivist paradigm that explores the meaning-making process through language, imagery, silence, and body. Such a design gives the investigation the possibility of going into the subjective experience, the narrative disruptions, and the ideological conflicts that underlie the text.

Methods of Analysis

The analytical approach integrates several complementary methods:

Close Reading

The exploration of narrative details, linguistic forms, pictorial representations, and the division of viewpoint is done with the help of a systematic close reading of *The Vegetarian*. Through close analysis of the text, it is possible to reveal the encoding of patriarchal domination, objectification, and meat refusal through both explicit and implicit narrative elements.

Symbolic and Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis reveals the ideological scaffold that operates in the text by the identification of ongoing concerns such as control, silence, resistance, sexuality, and dehumanisation, which are analysed through feminist and ecofeminist lenses. The symbolic motifs, including meat,

blood, plants, dreams, and bodily transformation, are dissected.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis investigates how, through language, medical authority, family power, and cultural norms, the identity of Yeong-hye was constructed, and her body was regulated. The methodology reveals the ideological mechanisms that oppress female autonomy by highlighting the patriarchal discourse that labels vegetarianism as vice, insanity, or merely a medical condition.

Application of Feminist, Ecofeminist, and Trauma Theories

The research thoroughly employs feminist theories of objectification, ecofeminist criticism of consumption and violence, interpreted by trauma studies as silence, withdrawal, and somatic resistance. These theoretical frames lead the interpretation of Yeong-hye's sufferings and reveal the interactions of gender, culture, species politics, and psychological disintegration.

Data Sources

Primary Source

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007; English translation 2015) is the primary text for the analysis. The three parts of the novel, the shifting narrative perspectives, and the heavy symbolism all together form the basis for the examination of representations of masculine power, freedom of the body, meat-eating virility, and revolt.

Secondary Sources

The secondary materials comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, feminist theoretical writings, ecofeminist literature, trauma studies, and interdisciplinary works on meat and politics. They are all crucial sources that contribute fundamentally to the areas of Korean culture, gender, ethical consumption, and narrative studies. Secondary literature, in large part, is in mainstream academic repositories such as Research Gate, JSTOR, and Elsevier.

Analytical Framework

The study employs a structured analytical model represented as:

Patriarchy → Objectification → Consumption → Meat Refusal → Transformation

The present framework retraces the journey of Yeong-hye from submission to the patriarchal system through bodily and spiritual resistance and finally vegetative transformation, which, in the end, puts both anthropocentric and gendered norms into question.

- Patriarchy as the dominant socio-cultural structure that resulted in violence, obedience, and power control is what the emphasis on patriarchy points to.
- Objectification highlights the visual, sexual, and medical exploitation of Yeong-hye's body as the location of the latter.
- Consumption is the sign of Carnophallogocentric food politics and the practice of consuming corpses—animal and female—becoming the former's and the latter's normalisation.
- Meat Refusal gets revealed as a revolutionary alteration of the status quo, placing vegetarianism in the position of moral and political resistance to the oppressors.
- The change is a mirror of Yeong-hye's metaphorical transformation into a plant, which should be seen not only as a flight from patriarchal cruelty but also as a rethinking of individuality that transcends human ranks.

The method of combination provides a reading of The Vegetarian that is theoretically guided and culturally conditioned at the same time. Furthermore, it allows for connecting the novel with large debates concerning gender, violence, and consumption, and even ecological resistance.

Analysis and Discussion

Patriarchy and Control in *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* reveals the pervasive patriarchal system that rules the Korean household, especially through the husband's rights and his view of Yeong-hye as a part of his social presentation. Mr Cheong's attitude towards his wife being "ordinary" and submissive is an example of what Munir and Liaqat point out as

the Foucault-type disciplinary practices applied to Korean women (Munir and Liaqat 102). Yeong-hye's refusal to cook meat, cater for visitors, and conduct marital obligations is an indication of how a patriarchal marriage serves as a battleground for controlling the body and emotions of the wife.

Familial pressure not only supports but also strengthens the gender-based hierarchy. In the scene of the violent force-feeding, which can be considered the most savage one in the whole book, Yeong-hye's father tries to reclaim his male superiority over her by combining ingestion with the metaphorical act of violent consumption of female autonomy. According to Shakeel et al., such scenes illustrate "the women's oppression under the patriarchal mandates of obedience and conformity" (Shakeel, Salim, and Diljan 125). The family members together keep a close watch on Yeong-hye's diet, clothing, and conduct to the extent that it becomes clear how female bodies are turned into public properties to be disciplined, appraised, and rectified.

The societal norms dictating female obedience served as a wider cultural scenery. Panta and Adhikari note that the masculinity of the Korean characters in the novel relies on "taking control by surveillance of female behaviours and looks" (Panta and Adhikari 39). The way Yeong-hye disapproves of these norms, her act creates a disturbance that consequently changes the nature of the conflict as the patriarchal system, which is already losing power, tries to reinforce itself with more violence.

Objectification of the Female Body

In *The Vegetarian*, the phenomenon of objectification functions on various levels, the first of which is sexual and domestic objectification within the marriage. Mr Cheong looks at Yeong-hye not as a person with rights but as an object whose only function is to meet his needs—this is exactly the kind of thing that Adams calls the "absent referent," where, like animals, women are also turned into mere objects that can be consumed (Adams 548).

The brother-in-law's creative endeavour has visual culture as its goal, and so, he takes the objectification to a whole new level. By covering Yeong-hye's body with flowers, filming her, and making her an eroticized art object, he nets her subjectivity while claiming to be an aesthete. Drewett, while looking into similar feminist-vegetarian stories, deduces that such artistic obsession generates the "consumptive gaze that eroticizes female flesh as spectacle" (Drewett 44). Yeong-hye is turned into a canvasquite literally, opened and subjected to voyeuristic imagination that is akin to patriarchal consumption.

The medical institutionalisation adds yet another layer of clinical objectification to the already existing two layers. The doctors frame Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and her psychological withdrawal as pathological deviations rather than indicating the patient's autonomy or the trauma she went through. Ferreira highlights that institutions often repeat the gendered politics of meat by categorising refusal as illness and compliance as health (Ferreira 230). The woman's body is turned into a medical battlefield where it can be invaded, restrained, and dominated.

These various kinds of objectification together may depict the "human-woman-animal continuum" as Bokiniec puts it, whereby women get the position of being closer to consumable creatures in the patriarchal culture (Bokiniec 28). Yeong-hye's body is edible, visible, usable, and disciplinary; it is just a matter of the male's desire and authority over the resource.

The Politics of Meat Refusal

Yeong-hye's sudden vegetarianism always considered unreasonable at first, gradually turns out to be an extraordinarily strong moral and political position. Consistent with Adams's hypothesis concerning the sexual politics of meat, the refusal of Yeong-hye causes the disconnection between manhood and meat-eating as a dominating force (Adams 550). Her decision can be seen as a moral protest against sin and a rejection of the male-dominated reasoning that equates power with consumption. Korean food culture attributes a great deal of symbolic value to meat, linking it to manliness, wealth of the nation and modernity after the war. Oliver demonstrates that men's enactment of

masculinity is typically based on meat consumption (Oliver 67). Klainberger also points out that meat advertising is a means of marketing and affirming male dominance (Klainberger 130). To the household, abstaining from meat is considered as cutting ties with the family and an outright denial of men's power—a perception that is supported by Ali's cross-cultural studies on the interrelation of meat, gender, and identity (Ali 270).

So, Yeong-hye's refusal provokes not only the questioning of the dietary habits but also the questioning of the cultural expectations which are so deeply rooted. Sen claims that her vegetarianism is "an ecofeminist strike against carnophallogocentric power" (Sen 10). The family's drastic response—hitting, force-feeding, and committing her to a mental institution—demonstrates the extent to which patriarchy is concerned with the control over women's food choices and bodies. As Sanan states, Yeong-hye's moral choice reveals the share of family and medical institutions in the perpetuation of gender violence (Sanan 87). This denial is a challenge to carnivore masculinity as well. Harrison explains that eating meat is an act of dominance in culture, and it is especially tied to the powerful masculine (Harrison 36). Yeong-hye's refusal makes the whole act of eating meat less gendered, thus revealing how easily men's world can lose its identity when women give up their power and claim it at the same time. In addition, food choice declares power over the body. To give Sanan credit, Yeong-hye's boldness is an ethical "no" to all kinds of violence mentioned—domestic, sexual, and species-based (Sanan 86). Dietary rebellion was her way of getting back the body that the patriarchal society tries to control and consume.

Vegetarianism, Trauma, and Bodily Transformation

One of the most intricate interpretative layers of the novel is formed by Yeong-hye's metamorphosis into a plant-like creature. The trauma studies indicate that the symptoms of withdrawal, silence, and somatic dissociation may come as extreme physical distancing, and Yeong-hye's plant-transformation corresponds to what Lai refers to as "arboreal subjectivity," a shift to nonhuman existence as a safeguard against overpowering brutality (Lai 836). Plant transformation is both an escape and a liberation at the same time. It internalises what Tsimpouki indicates as a "posthuman reconfiguration of the self," in which Yeong-hye goes beyond the human class that has only been associated with patriarchal oppression (Tsimpouki 214). Being a plant grants her the right to take the position where she cannot be used up—through sex, sight, or society.

Nevertheless, this change also brings along the paradox of self-annihilation and self-liberation. Ghimire maintains that Yeong-hye's "becoming-plant" is a process that swings between the killing of the person and the creation of a new, moral, and peaceful living condition that entirely rejects violence (Ghimire 30). This indecisiveness is indicative of the novel's refusal to treat trauma or resistance simply. In the end, the female body turns out to be the ultimate limit of independence. Cluett's notion of "vegetal affect" indicates that Yeong-hye's metamorphosis conveys withdrawal from the very emotions inherent in the structures that inflict her suffering, thus allowing her to create such a new insensitivity as to be saved from the patriarchal oppression (Cluett 12). During this transformation, Yeong-hye not only makes use of the systems that aimed at turning her into their object but also incarnates an anti-patriarchal posthuman resistance, which, moreover, is not confined to the logic of patriarchy.

Findings

The dissection of *The Vegetarian* has resulted in the emergence of four principal discoveries which shed light on the feminist, ecofeminist, and posthuman perspectives of the novel.

Patriarchal Structures Operate at Every Interpersonal and Institutional Level

The study indicates that the prevailing male culture has not only reached Yeong-hye's abode but has also permeated the larger institutional structures that influence her life. The husband's feeling of possession, the family's unwilling

involvement, and the hospital's labelling of her as a mental patient all together depict how social structures regulate women's bodies and choices. Patriarchal power works through both intimate and institutional violence. The findings imply that Yeong-hye's rebellion is exceedingly difficult to understand in a society that expects women to be submissive and obedient.

Meat Refusal Emerges as Resistance but Invites Patriarchal Punishment

The research substantiates that Yeong-hye's abstention from meat is a symbolic and moral refusal of male-dominated and species-based cruelty. But this rebellious act is faced by the increasing forms of punishment—insults, physical pressure, and mental hospitalisation. Her refusal to eat meat is interpreted as a violation of the rules of society because it affects the gendered politics of consumption. With reference to Adams's theory, the results indicate that the rejection of meat makes it hard for Carnophallogocentric principles to stand, thus inciting fierce efforts to re-establish patriarchal rule.

Objectification Results in Psychological Collapse and Bodily Withdrawal

The study reveals that Yeong-hye's mental collapse is connected purely to the total series of treatments of her as an object—sexual, visual, domestic, and clinical, among others. The husband's claim to her sexually, the brother-in-law's treating her body as an erotic art object, and the medicalisation of her resistance all lead to a strong feeling of dispossession.

The results indicate that Yeong-hye's psychological withdrawal and refusal to eat are not manifestations of individual pathology but rather reactions to a social system that constantly devours and erases female subjectivity.

Transformation Reflects both Trauma and Radical Reimagining of Bodily Autonomy

The last conclusion recognises Yeong-hye's plant-transformation as a multifaceted act influenced by both trauma and agency. Her transformation was a long-overdue response to the violence that had lasted so long, but it also gave her the power to make an even stronger claim and to demonstrate her autonomy over her body radically, thus bringing things into the sphere of the patriarchal framework.

This is in line with the posthuman readings that consider her metamorphosis as a rejection of any system that relies on oppression, consumption, and human dominance. The findings suggest that Yeong-hye's becoming-plant—which is a pity—reflects the only scenario in which her body is no longer under the control of patriarchy.

Conclusion

Summary of Arguments

As per the analysis, the novel *The Vegetarian* is a major criticism of the male-centred society through the elaborate use of metaphors such as consumption, flesh, and rejection. Yeong-hye's turning point from the man's woman in her own house to the non-human rebel illustrates the infinite cycle of patriarchy through domination, objectification and consumption. In other words, her rejection of meat is a non-violent act based on ethical considerations that is in line with the struggle against the already existing structures of Carnophallogocentric masculinity.

The refusal of meat is escalated to political action and even to a form of punishment, thus unmasking the dynamics of the patriarchal social systems that take revenge on the women asserting their right to bodily freedom. Yeong-hye's change into a plant-like existence signifies the intermingling of trauma, resistance, and the redefinition of one's identity beyond the limits of patriarchal and anthropocentric boundaries.

Implications

Feminist Implications

The findings back the feminist claim that the female body is mostly associated with power struggles, subjugation, and buying and selling. Yeong-hye's situation is merely a microcosm of the larger universal trends in the violence inflicted on women, their coercion, and their being treated as objects, which in turn necessitates a scrutiny of the oppressive practices already existing in the private and public infrastructures.

It can be argued that patriarchy never spares women, whoever might be the location of their struggle: home, art world, or hospital.

Ecofeminist Critique of Food Ethics and Gendered Violence

Through the foregrounding of a symbolic connection between women and animals, the novel aligns with the eco-feminist criticisms that a patriarchal culture is simultaneously devouring both female and non-human bodies. Yeong-hye's choice of a vegetarian diet exposes the moral inconsistencies of a society that legitimises itself through dietary and gender norms.

Her rejection severs the connection that associates masculinity with the consumption of meat as an indication of power and, at the same time, reveals that food ethics are intricately connected to gendered oppression.

Contributions to Korean and Global Literary Studies

By taking into consideration socio-cultural factors such as women's position in Korea, patriarchal family systems, and structures of social discipline, this study reorients interpretation of Korean literature through *The Vegetarian*.

The novel's international appeal has shown its linkage with the debates on transnational feminism, trauma, and posthumanism. Its uneven structure, rich symbolism, and deep psychological insight mark it as a significant modern novel for the study of gender, body, and resistance.

Recommendations for Future Research

Comparative Studies Across Feminist Texts

Students in the future may find it advantageous to compare *The Vegetarian* with other feminist novels that deal with the same themes of bodily autonomy, food politics, and resistance, like *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood or *Milk Fed* by Melissa Broder . Bringing the different texts together will allow one to follow the similarities in gendered consumption and resistance across cultures.

Expanding Research to Other Cultural Contexts

Considering that food customs, gender roles, and patriarchal systems differ from one society to another, it might be profitable to look at the issues of women's negotiation through violence, refusal, and embodiment in similar literary contexts of South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, or Latin American cultures.

Further Exploration of Gendered Food Politics and Posthuman Embodiment

Future scholars might investigate more closely food's influence on the formation of gendered identity, bodily autonomy, and political power. The nonhuman aspects of Yeong-hye's metamorphosis—an issue considered by Tsimpouki, Ghimire, and Cluett—suggest the need to further research the point at which non-human becoming can be viewed as a radical critique of anthropocentrism and patriarchal violence. Such studies will deepen the knowledge on the issues of embodiment, empathy, and the ethical dilemmas involved in co-existing with consumption-oriented systems.

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